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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [AG](#) [WI](#) [UN](#)  
SUBJECT: NEA/MAG DIRECTOR'S DISCUSSION OF SAHRAWI REFUGEES  
WITH MFA DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR MULTILATERAL AFFAIRS BOUGUERRA

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman,  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶1.](#) (C) During visiting NEA/MAG Director Jordan's February 26 courtesy call on MFA Multilateral Relations Director General Bouguerra, the latter engaged in spirited discussion of UNHCR's unilateral decision to cut food assistance to Sahrawi refugees and argued that a new census could not be carried out because it touched directly the political issues at the heart of the Western Sahara dispute. (Discussions on Iran's nuclear program, a Security Council seat for Venezuela, and Algeria's candidacy for the Peace Building Commission reported septels).

DISAGREEMENT ON A CENSUS OF SAHRAWI REFUGEES  
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[¶2.](#) (C) Noting that Jordan had just returned from a visit to the refugee camps near Tindouf, Bouguerra said that the quantity of food aid for the refugees was insufficient and that UNHCR's unilateral decision to reduce the provision of assistance from 165,000 to 90,000 refugees was unfair and unacceptable. In this regard, Bouguerra said Algeria had received a UNHCR delegation a few days earlier and had used this meeting to press Algerian concerns.

[¶3.](#) (C) Jordan and Ambassador said there needed to be a census of Sahrawi refugees in order to establish the correct level of food assistance. Ambassador said that in making the case for assistance, governments had to have accurate and credible figures they could provide to their legislative bodies responsible for funding such programs. With refreshing frankness, Bouguerra argued the issue was not simply technical in nature. It was political and went to the heart of the Western Sahara issue since it bore directly on the question of self-determination and who could participate in a self-determination vote. In this regard, the Western Sahara refugee situation was unique and could not be compared to other refugee situations. He argued that in conjunction with the Baker Plan, the UN had estimated the number of Sahrawi voters at 128,000. Why couldn't the UNHCR use "its own figure" which, when combined with non-voting age Sahrawis, brought it up to the 165,000 level that has been the figure used up until recently? As for legislative bodies asking for more precise numbers, the GOA's contacts with other governments suggested somewhat lamely that no country has been required to produce exact figures.

14. (C) Reflecting discussions he had during his visit to the camps, Jordan said there was concern about the lack of accountability for food donations and other resources at the camps. Allegations of pilfering were common, and the stocks at the warehouses were not well managed by the Red Crescent. The lack of food stocks was precipitating a crisis since more food was withdrawn each month than deposited. Stocks are maintained for 90,000 refugees, according to Jordan, but the withdrawals were based on the 165,000 refugee figure. The solution, stressed Jordan, was a true census to resolve all doubts about the number of refugees present. This was the only refugee population in the world that refused a census.

#### SAHRAWI CASE UNIQUE IN GOA EYES

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15. (C) Returning to his earlier argument, Bouguerra said the Sahrawis were a unique case of decolonization in the world. The refugee population, he explained, was also the core of the electorate for any referendum on the future status of the Western Sahara. Any registration of the population was thus by definition political. UNHCR could not mix the politics of a referendum, such as envisioned by the Baker Plan, with the distribution of food. Refugee issues should not complicate a political solution, even if such a solution was at an impasse, declared Bouguerra.

16. (C) Jordan said the U.S. understood that the fate of the Western Sahara was a sensitive political problem. For the U.S., food distribution in the camps was a technical matter that required resolution. The U.S. wanted to mobilize the international community to meet the needs of the refugees, especially after the recent flooding in the area. However, a

clear, precise figure of need was necessary for donating partners. It was too important to the refugees to let these issues remain unresolved. The question of a census would continue to surface, stated Jordan. Even though for the U.S. it was a technical issue, it called into question fundamental political issues for the Sahrawis.

#### CENSUS REQUIRES A POLITICAL SOLUTION

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17. (C) Bouguerra noted that holding a census was a political question for the Algerians as well. A census required a political solution. The question of identifying the electoral care had to come ahead of extant refugee matters. As the host country, Algeria gave more aid to the Sahrawis than anyone, added Bouguerra. The unilateral cutback in assistance, based on a population of only 90,000, would increase the burden on Algeria. The World Food Program, emphasized Bouguerra, had never told Algeria there was a food distribution problem in the camps. "If these problems exist, we should know," he added. It was important to separate propaganda from the serious.

18. (C) Ambassador said the U.S. was very cognizant of the humanitarian needs of the Sahrawis. The U.S. has been one of the largest donors for a period of many years and would continue to provide such humanitarian assistance. Ambassador noted that the Department of State had approved his recommendation to provide \$ 50,000 in supplemental emergency food assistance. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld had also just approved an additional request for \$1.3 million to fund the transportation of UN emergency relief items to the Sahrawi refugees. Bouguerra thanked the Ambassador, noting the dimensions of the catastrophe were large. Algeria appreciated the assistance.

19. (U) William Jordan did not have the opportunity to clear this message.

ERDMAN